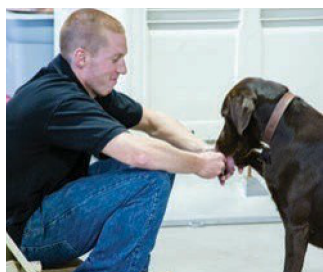


# United States Of Wine: New Jersey

by Stuart Pigott

“We’re still a young wine region, and there are some prejudices about us we have to overcome.”  
—Mike Beneduce



Mike Beneduce is an ambitious young American winemaker who has produced some aromatic and elegant dry chardonnay, riesling, gewurztraminer and blaifränkisch since his debut vintage in 2012. He’s the new kid on the block in a cool-climate region that is struggling to be taken as seriously as well-established cool-climate wine regions like the Sonoma Coast in California or the Finger Lakes in New York State. You almost certainly haven’t heard of Beneduce Vineyards because it is in Pittstown, in northwestern New Jersey.

“I think we have to prove that we can make good wines,” said Beneduce humbly. “We’re still a young wine region, and I’m well aware that there are some prejudices about us we have to overcome.” He probably wouldn’t have gotten to plant his own vineyards if his father didn’t have a successful ornamental plant nursery with both land and the capital to make that possible. Mike Beneduce’s vineyards stand right next to his father’s greenhouses; he knows that he’s been lucky that one could subsidize the other.

The fact is that the deck is stacked against ambitious New Jersey winemakers like Beneduce. The biggest problem they face has nothing to do with the way their wines smell or taste, and everything to do with how New Jersey looks when you take the Holland Tunnel there from Manhattan, then head

down I-95 towards the majority of the vineyards. Those myriad smoke stacks and chemical plants define the words “industrial landscape” for many millions of Americans, making the character of the state seem incompatible with high-quality wine production. Few wine drinkers seem to have registered the beauty of the rolling hill country in the northwest, although it’s only an hour’s drive away from the Jersey end of the tunnel.

Another reason that New Jersey’s winemakers are still struggling for recognition is that the state lacks what economists call a “cluster.” Napa Valley, with its many wineries packed close together, is the perfect example of a wine-industry cluster. The economic effect of this is magnified by Napa’s proximity to the San Francisco Bay Area, which makes it an ideal day-trip and tourist destination. Those factors, no less than high wine quality or marketing savvy, were the foundations for Napa Valley’s current image as America’s wine paradise. The wineries of New Jersey might be close enough to NYC and Philly for that kind of effect, too, but they are so scattered throughout the state that hopping from one tasting room to the next is hard work.

### **It’s worth taking the time to explore, however.**

Sommeliers at top New York restaurants have been stunned when confronted with New Jersey wines like the 2013 Pheasant Hill Chardonnay from Unionville Vineyards in Ringoes, close to the center of the state. In blind tastings, experts have often mistaken this wine for elegant, mineral-driven premier cru Chablis from France with just a kiss of oak. However, most NYC sommeliers and store buyers have so far been unwilling to stick their



necks out for their neighboring state. Pascaline Lepeltier of *Rouge Tomate* is a rare NYC sommelier who openly admits to admiring the Unionville Vineyards wines.

New Jersey's potential for reds is probably even greater than for dry whites. While the hill country of the north is better suited to cool-climate grape varieties, the southern reaches can easily ripen Bordeaux varieties. For example, the 2013 BDX Meritage (a blend of merlot plus cabernets sauvignon and franc) from Heritage Vineyards in Mullica Hill just south of Philly easily could be taken for a modern red from Bordeaux's Left Bank.

There are good reasons for that resemblance, most importantly the climate similarities—both regions tend to be humid, with warm summers. Then there are the generally flat, gravelly vineyard landscapes in much of Bordeaux and in the sprawling Outer Coastal Plain AVA of southern New Jersey. The big difference between the two landscapes is that in southern New Jersey, the vineyards often stand next to blueberry fields or peach orchards, sometimes even rows of tomatoes or bell peppers.

Hot local demand also prevents New Jersey wines from making it to stores and restaurants in the cities of the Northeast or beyond. As Beneduce explained, "most of our wine is sold to local people. They want the wines as early as we can get them onto the market, and they usually sell out fast."

This has encouraged most quality-orientated producers to major in styles that are attractive on release. A rare exception would be the Europa series from Louis Caracciolo's Almathea Cellars in Atco, particularly the powerful and dry cabernet sauvignon-based wines bearing the numbers I and II. They are closely modeled on the wines of Bordeaux's Château Margaux and Château Latour respectively, producers Caracciolo is well familiar with. (He consulted for the recently deceased Paul Pontallier of Château Margaux).

"We have the potential to make wines that can match the great growths of Bordeaux, and we need to tell people that," is Caracciolo's answer to the question "why?" The frequency and conviction with which he has repeated this assertion has led to accusations of exaggeration or even arrogance. If

anything, due to their relatively sleek body and the touch of green-bell-pepper aroma (pyrazines), his wines are closer in flavor profile to red Bordeaux of the 1970s and '80s than to that region's current production. Perhaps that is just too weird or wonderful for mainstream success?

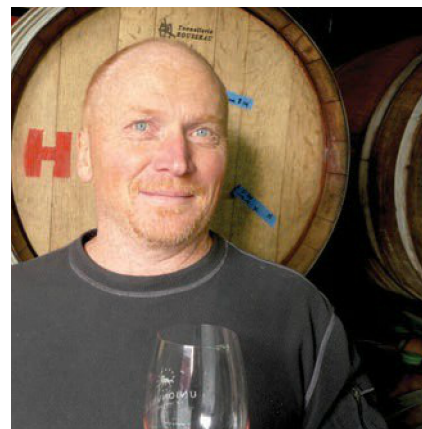
In this context of wildly contrasting wine styles, Unionville Vineyards in Ringoes looks like the state's "classic" due to the balance and subtlety of their wines. That comes down to precise viticulture in a cool location, and to the talents of their UC-Davis-and-Napa-Valley-trained winemaker Cameron Stark, who has been on board since 2003. His chardonnay from the Pheasant Hill Vineyard has probably won more out-of-state medals, and attracted more out-of-state attention, than any other New Jersey wine. It's fascinating to taste it against the same vintage of his chardonnay from Unionville's home vineyard, which always has a pineapple aroma and a slightly richer texture, tasting more like a Côte de Beaune white than a Chablis (both are consistently below 13.5 percent alcohol).

Stark makes a remarkably elegant, peppery syrah at Unionville Vineyards that might easily be taken for a wine from a cooler-climate appellation of the Rhône Valley. He also ripens other red Rhône grapes such as grenache and counoise, plus whites including marsanne and roussanne. This suggests that improved vineyard management could do a great deal for the quality of the state's wines.

**Chambourcin is the joker in the deck.** Often the variety can produce wines that are a bit thin and tart, but when it is taken seriously in the vineyard and winery it shines. Working Dog Winery in East Windsor, just off I-95 in the center of the state, farms it carefully and even gives it some new oak. The result is a rich, powerful red with pepper and fennel notes and a fresh acidity that make it very distinctive. New Jersey grape grower and theorist Dr. Larry Coia of Coia Vineyards in East Vineland in the Outer Coastal Plain AVA is convinced that red blends of chambourcin and the Bordeaux grapes could give the state a distinctive product of consistent good quality that would become a signature wine for New Jersey. How wild is that? ■

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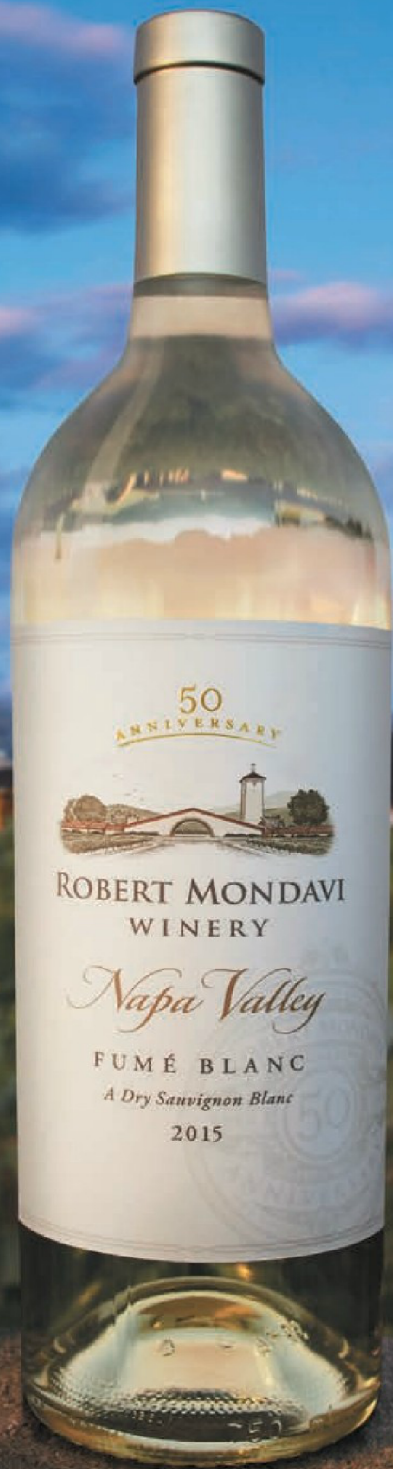
—Louis Caracciolo



Best known for his chardonnay, Unionville Vineyard's Cameron Stark makes an elegant, peppery syrah as well.

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